

SOUCHON (E.) *Compliments of the Author*

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REMINISCENCES OF
DR. J. MARION SIMS
IN PARIS

BY

EDMOND SOUCHON, M.D.

PROFESSOR OF ANATOMY AND CLINICAL SURGERY, TULANE UNIVERSITY,
NEW ORLEANS, LA.

Reprinted from the MEDICAL RECORD, December 8, 1894



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REMINISCENCES OF DR. J. MARION SIMS IN PARIS.¹

I HAVE often related to my friends the manner in which I happened to meet our surgical genius, Dr. J. Marion Sims, in Paris, and his first experiences in the French capital. They all were much interested in this as they were in everything pertaining to this great and good man, and they repeatedly asked me to write out the little story for the benefit of the profession at large. I, to-day, comply with this wish, regretting very deeply for all concerned that my pen is not more gifted, so as to do better justice to my hero and to my readers.

In the fall of 1860 I entered the old Charity Hospital on the rue Jacob as a benevolent student, in the service of the venerable and world-renowned Professor Velpeau. It was my first beginning in the study of medicine. Facilities to beginners over there are not so great as they are here, in our Southern hospitals especially, and in order to have a chance to come in close contact with the professor and the patients, a simple voluntary student of the service had to be over-zealous with all, particularly the all-powerful internes or lords of the service. After several months of trial I had succeeded in ingratiating myself with them all, and having been intrusted with the registration-book of the in-coming and out-going patients, with the number of bed, diagnosis, and dates, I had managed to be on as fairly good terms with Professor Velpeau as a little insignificant nobody like myself.

¹ Read at the meeting of the Southern Surgical Association at Charleston, S. C., November 14, 1894.

could be with such a magnate as was the great Velpeau in such a place as the great Paris at that period. This may seem rather hard to American students, but it is all true none the less.

Early one morning in the latter part of October, 1861, the year the War of Secession broke out, I was going to the hospital, and, as I was about to enter the gate, my attention was attracted at once by the face and appearance of a man who was coming toward the gate also, but from the opposite direction. That the face and appearance struck me at once will readily be believed by all those who have had the happiness of knowing our great American surgeon. Its characteristic soft and sweet expression, together with his deep-set, bright eyes and prominent, bushy eyebrows, the half-smiling expression of his mouth, left uncovered by the absence of mustache or beard, made a much deeper impression on me than a glance ordinarily produces. I also at once recognized that he was a foreigner, and no Englishman at that, but surely and unmistakably an American, perhaps, hastily thought my young rebel heart, a Southerner; he must be that, I thought immediately afterward, because he looked so gentle and good, and yet, withal, so firm and self reliant. All this took but a few seconds, and I continued my course toward the ward to which I was assigned, walking through the yards with another student and the stranger coming up behind. When I reached the door of my ward I went through and closed it; it was soon opened again and closed; turning around I noticed my "American." The doctor told me later that at the foot of the stairs the other student went in another direction than I, and he was perplexed for a moment as to which one he would follow; after a little hesitation he said to himself: "Well, I think I will stick to the little one." The little one was myself.

I walked to the bed of the patient who took care of the white aprons the students wear over there, to protect their clothes, and, as I was putting it on the stranger

came up to me, and after a most suave bow, said in a very slow and deliberate manner, that the Frenchman he thought he was addressing might have some chance of understanding : " Will—Professor—Velpeau—be—here —to day ? " I burst out laughing and answered him in fluent English : " No, sir, Professor Velpeau is absent on his vacation and will not return before two weeks." The beautiful face brightened up at the sound of the English language where and when he so little expected it. " Where are you from," said he, " that you speak English ? " " I am from the South, from New Orleans," said I, thinking that that would cool his enthusiasm if he was a Yankee. But far from it, he grasped my hand and pressed it so as to crush it. " Why," said he, " I also am a Southerner ; I lived a long time in Montgomery, Ala." That made us friends at once. I showed the doctor around the hospital and finally asked him what he had come over here for.

" Well," said he, " I am Dr. Marion Sims, now living in New York, who has invented a method of operating for vesico vaginal fistula with almost invariable success." He looked at me to see if the name had made any impression on me, but it fell flat ; we had never heard of Dr. Marion Sims in Paris. Furthermore, we all knew that nobody in the world knew anything about vesico-vaginal fistula except Professor Jobert de Lamballe, of the Hôtel Dieu, and, even under him, vesico-vaginal fistula was cured only exceptionally, even when using his procédé de glissement (sliding process), and the idea of this new man coming to Paris to teach French surgeons how to cure vesico-vaginal fistula almost infallibly, somewhat shook my faith in my new friend.

He said he had a letter for Professor Velpeau from Dr. Valentine Mott, of New York ; that he was anxious to see the professor to get a case to operate on before him and thus to demonstrate his method. " Well," I said, " the professor will be here in some fifteen days," soon enough for your good, I thought to myself.

During that time the doctor was living in a little boarding-house in rue de l'Université, close to the hospital. He had invited me to dinner upon our very first meeting, and I went there once or twice to give him all the points about those men he was most likely to meet. He was all the time sanguinely confident and looked so sweet, so modest, so magnetic, that I began to feel a very strong drawing toward him, and by the time Velpeau was to return I was wound up to a high pitch and as eager as my friend that he should have a case soon.

Finally Professor Velpeau arrived, and I sent word to Dr. Sims immediately ; he soon came to present his letter, which Velpeau read at once and fluently, but when it came to speaking to Dr. Sims he was at a loss to express himself and looked around for me. It was always the case when prominent English visitors came to the hospital. Although the Englishmen read and wrote French as well as the Frenchmen read and wrote English, a good deal better than I could then, yet when it came to talking they had the greatest difficulty in understanding each other, and I was always hunted up to help them along. At that time Velpeau was nearing the end of a most hard-worked career, and, although age and success had softened him, yet he still bore the effects of his lowly, rough, peasant birth, and of his hard earned victory. At times the stiff haughtiness of the former years of struggle came over him. It did so to some extent at that time, and he was not to Sims exactly what he should have been, as I thought, and his coldness to him made my heart ache somewhat, as I took that to be of ill omen. The truth was that the name American at that time in Paris always evoked the name of Barnum, and the fact that a comparatively young surgeon posed as a successful operator on vesico-vaginal fistula, when scarcely anyone, not even Jobert de Lamballe, ever succeeded in Paris, had rather prejudiced Velpeau against Sims.

After a few, very few words, Velpeau said to me, "Eh bien, que veut-il?" "Well, what does he want?" I

translated the sentence to Sims, who at once modestly but firmly answered, "I want a case to demonstrate my operation, if the professor will be kind enough to procure one for me." "All right," said Velpeau, "I will get him one," in a way that showed he had but little confidence in the final result. Then he turned around without a hand shake or a word more to Sims and went on with his visit. I felt quite hurt, but could say, and said, nothing. Velpeau was the idol of all young aspiring surgeons, the demi-god of the day. Nélaton was just looming up then, and had not as yet had his famous Garibaldi case which gave him world-wide fame.

For several days no case turned up. Sims was there every morning. I would introduce him to the younger surgeons who always swarmed around the old master, that he might not forget them. To every one who inquired about his object he said, "I want a case," and I myself would then also say, "He wants a case."

At last the case came! And, just as luck would have it, a case of moderate difficulty. "Thank the Lord," said I, with my American pride roused now to a high pitch for fear Sims should fail! When he told me he was sure to succeed it was a great relief.

By this time the whole of the old Quartier Latin had heard of the news, which had rapidly spread from hospital to hospital. On the day of the operation the famous little operating-theatre in the old Charity Hospital was overcrowded with students, and the arena below crowded also with the most distinguished professors of surgery of the French capital; Velpeau, Nélaton, Ricord, Malgaigne, etc., all but Jobert de Lamballe, who would not come.

Before beginning the operation Dr. Sims proceeded to demonstrate it graphically, by using a piece of thick and hard cotton batting, through which he cut a hole representing the fistula, then he pared the edges slantingly in one strip, next he passed the silk threads and the wires, etc. The doctor called on me to translate as he

spoke. I was not expecting this, and before such an audience, and I felt shy and scared, but he so insisted with his sweet eyes and smile that I got up, trembling all over, and with a quivering voice would repeat in French each sentence as he uttered it in English. Gradually, however, I found that it was not so very hard, I became emboldened and went through the whole procedure with comparative comfort. After the demonstration Dr. Sims proceeded with the operation, which he performed with the skill and grace which characterized him. It was done in comparatively no time, closely watched and followed all the time by the French professors. When the doctor finally said it was done, a salvo of applause broke out from the benches; the professors rendered justice to the manner in which the operation had been performed, while reserving themselves mentally until the day when the sutures would be removed.

Dr. Sims attended to that case himself in the ward, and during the following days felt all along confident that it would be a success; and a success, a tremendous success, it turned out to be.

On the ninth day the same amphitheatre was again packed to witness the removal of the sutures; the case was pronounced cured, and this was confirmed by the French surgeons, who congratulated Dr. Sims.

The enthusiasm of the French students far exceeded their former outburst, and, since they could not very well carry Dr. Sims on their shoulders in triumph they took hold of me in his place, and the resident students carried me to their mess-room to breakfast with them; a great and unprecedented honor in those days, for I was but a vulgar, simple, insignificant first-year student! I did more talking than eating, and the result of the excitement of mind and of heart was a very fine first-class headache that sent me to bed and lasted twenty-four hours.

However, some seemed to think that it might have

been a chance cure. But these were soon to be set right. Immediately after the success of the first case, Dr. Sims started on the war path for another, which was soon procured for him by a physician in private practice. But this case came very near being a Waterloo. It was taken to a private place, the Hôtel Voltaire, on the Quai Voltaire. The patient was a short, fat, stumpy little woman, and very obstinate. She, all of a sudden, absolutely refused to be operated upon unless she was given chloroform and put fast asleep. This much annoyed Dr. Sims, because in those days it was not thought quite safe to place a patient on the left side, the side of the heart, to give chloroform to the extent of keeping her perfectly still, since nothing could be done otherwise, and for such a long period as an hour or two. We were far then from the ideas of the present day. There was no overcoming her stubbornness and her will had to be done. It all went well for a while, a good while, but, all at once, the breathing became stertorous, the face blue, and the pulse flagged. The operation had to be suspended until she recovered. The operation was then resumed, but soon had to be stopped again, for the same reasons. Things were looking a little blue also, and as though the operator would not be able to complete the operation. But it was not to be so ; it was to be completed, but it took Sims's whole nerve and skill to bring it to completion. During all that time the distinguished guests present said and did nothing, leaving Sims and his assistants to do all the fighting and get all the odium in case of failure, but all the credit in case of success. At one time I spoke to Velpeau to ask him what he thought of the condition of the patient, he shook his old silvery head and I imparted to Sims what I took that to mean, that he might make the best of it. Finally the patient rallied and was put to bed. At the end of the usual time this case was pronounced a success.

A couple of weeks later Professor Jarjavay secured another case, upon which Dr. Sims operated at the Hô-

pital St. Antoine. At the time of the removal of the sutures, a week or so later, Dr. Sims was not pleased with the appearance of the parts, and expressed his apprehension of some ulceration setting in and destroying the work done to a greater or lesser extent. Professor Jarjavay said that even if there was a fistulette (a small fistula) left it would not matter much. Although he seemed to say this in a good spirit, yet it occurred to some that some people would be glad to hail this as a failure of the so-called infallible American method. But no fistulette occurred, and that case was also placed on record as a complete success.

From that time on cases were quite frequent, and naturally so, since hardly any were ever cured before, the stock of fistulæ was very great, and cases were not wanting. It was specially in private practice that they appeared to be abundant, and Dr. Sims scored success after success with the greatest ease. However, he again struck another hard case, even a worse one than the one at the Hôtel Voltaire; it was the famous case of the "Countess" out in the country, in a château, a patient of Professor Nélaton. She also insisted upon taking chloroform, and when the operation was about half through she showed all at once most alarming symptoms. It was then that Nélaton uttered the legendary cry, "Head down," which everyone conversant with these matters must remember. After much and still more anxiety the poor illustrious patient was revived and the operation was safely completed. It turned out also a complete success.

Cases followed one another wherever the doctor went; in Paris, London, Germany, etc., he was kept busy with fistulæ and other female cases. It was he who then sowed the first seeds of true gynecological science and art throughout Europe, the science so eminently and thoroughly American.

Wherever Sims went he coined money, although he incessantly, willingly, and kindly did much charity

work. He is the only man I ever knew or heard of who had such a vogue wherever he went. No French, English, or German surgeon could go to the capital of another country and have such calls and such success, no matter how great he was considered at home.

Dr. Sims made a host of friends among the surgeons of all countries, and it could not be otherwise, with his gentle, kind, unpretentious ways. However, some of his easy-going American professional ways did not suit all of them, and some became a trifle cold and reserved toward him. Perhaps they were glad to find some flaw, ever so trifling, in such a beautiful gem. Surely, if they could have read thoroughly through his pure and simple heart and mind, they would have seen how unconventional were his ways, and how little he thought he was giving any offence or had any idea he was doing wrong.

Some time after all this the doctor brought his family over to live in Paris. From that time on the doctor's history is known to all Americans proud of the surgical genius born in our great land.

One day he said in a burst of kindness: "How fortunate it was for me to have met you that morning I went to the old Charity. I was so thoroughly discouraged that I had about made up my mind to go back home!" Of course it was his goodness which made him express it that way and with such force, for he surely would have met some one else to play the rôle I was so fortunate and so happy to perform.

He spent his money lavishly: all the needy Southerners and Northerners then in Paris were recipients of his generosity.

One day in his house, in the rue de Balzac, we were alone in his studio when he all at once asked me: "How are you getting along here, anyhow?" "Well," said I, "I am starving as slowly as I can. All resources from home have ceased since the war has begun, and but for a little position of \$20 a month, which Professor Velpeau's influence secured for me, I would have suc-

cumbed to hunger and cold by this time." He replied, "Anything you need I will be glad to give you; I am making plenty of money now." I thanked him very much, but gratefully declined any assistance, because, if I borrowed, I intended to return it some day, and just then it was rather problematical if I should last to return and pay any indebtedness. However, he would not be contented unless I promised him to come to him if ever I needed any help. All this was said and done with a simplicity which was overwhelming, especially to one accustomed by recent education and association to the good but exuberant French people.

The following year, however, was the time for me to prepare my competitive examination for the "Internship," *i.e.*, to be admitted a resident student in the Paris Hospital. That examination is, over there, the *pons asinorum*. It is held as the proof that there is something in the man, and in fact very few are those who attain any eminence in Paris who have not gone through that ordeal. It is really a very hard competitive examination, and it requires all the time of any student from early morning till late in the night to succeed. Very few succeeded the first time, usually it required two trials at one year's interval. I had to do it in one year or quit the study of medicine. I needed, therefore, every moment of the days of the year of preparation, and therefore it was necessary for me to renounce my little situation. Now if I could not get Dr. Sims to assist me as he once proposed to do, what would become of poor me! Of course he had offered his assistance, but that was nearly two years ago, and perhaps he had changed his mind since, or could he still afford to do it, now that he had a large family to provide for in a gay and expensive capital?

I called at his house, then in the rue de Suresnes, so familiar to so many Americans, but he was out of town and would not be back for some time. When? No one could say positively: he was in London, they said, and

very busy there ! Yet time was flying and I had to take a decision, and no Dr. Sims ! But at last he returned. I called in the middle of the day, thinking I had then a better chance of meeting him alone. He was in fact alone, taking his lunch ; as usual, he greeted me with his kind look, sweet smile, and hearty shake hand. He invited me to lunch with him and I sat down to the table ; but I could not swallow a morsel, my mouth was dry, my throat contracted, and my heart beating very fast. After a little trivial talk I summoned up all my courage and said to him : " Doctor, you once told me that if ever I was in need to come to you, and that you would help me along. Well, I am now in the greatest distress and upon you depends my whole future." " Why, what has happened, Souchon," said he, with concern in his dear face. " Well, sir," said I, " I have to give up my little situation in order to prepare for my examination for the residenceship of the hospital, and unless you give me to-day the assistance you offered two years ago, it will be impossible for me to do so and I must give up the study of medicine." " Oh, no," said he, " don't do that, I will help you certainly ; how much do you want ? " It was said with such natural kindness and simplicity that my heart sank within me : I felt as if a thousand pounds had been removed from my breast. " Thirty dollars per month will suffice," said I. " What," said he, " a dollar only a day. Oh no, take two." I thanked him very gratefully but consented to accept only one dollar and a half a day, remarking that I might never be able to return that little even. " All right," said he, " I will take my chances on that." He retired to his library and soon returned with a check for the first month in advance, and also for several hundred francs to buy some little furniture and clothing which he said I very likely needed. I should think I did need them ! From that time the check came every month, no matter where he was—in France, England, Germany, or America. He never forgot it once, and when it happened,

very rarely, that he was a few days behind, he would write a few words of apology.

When at last I was so fortunate as to succeed in my examination and I telegraphed to him in London, he immediately wired back that the news had sent a thrill of joy through the whole family; this in its turn sent a thrill of joy through me also.

The doctor's reputation had acquired such proportions that the French Government presented him with the decoration of Knight of the Legion of Honor, the highest ambition of all Frenchmen. It so happened that I was present in the forenoon of the day when the mounted dragoon from the State office brought the large, many sealed envelope containing the brevet. It was the cause of great rejoicing in the family and among his friends. He himself did not believe very much in such trinkets, but he was happy because all around him were happy. I was despatched to go down to the Palais Royal to buy the ribbon worn in the button-hole. I chose it as nice and neat as I thought he would like, and brought it home, when I had the happiness of being asked to place it myself in the button-hole on the left side, over his noble and good heart.

Another notable instance of his great kindness is, when upon a visit through a London hospital, the physician in charge told him that he had in his ward a Confederate surgeon who, heart-broken, had left the down-trodden South to seek rest somewhere. He had worked his passage through to London by acting as steward on board ship, but when he reached London his little money, his feeble health, his crushed heart, all had given way and he had stranded in a London hospital. Sims at once went to him, recognized a friend from the same grand State of Alabama, cheered him, saw him well, and brought him to his own house, and assisted him back home. All this I was told by the man himself, who, upon his return home became a most noted teacher of medicine in one of our famed Southern medical colleges.

I remember Dr. Sims in only one case of sickness. He was alone in the Grand Hotel in Paris, without any of his family with him, when he sent me word to come and see him. He had been suffering for some time from a repetition of an attack of pain and swelling in the right iliac region, and seemed concerned about his condition. Surely if it had been some years later he would have been appendicitized. But, thank God, he got well without the knife.

Alas! but that no human happiness is ever without a dark cloud! It was my distressing lot to be present at his house when the sad news came of the death of his eldest son, Granville. It was but a short message, quickly read, followed by a cry and a sob: "Oh God! Granville is dead!" Granville had torn himself away from Paris and his family and had gone to Havana to find a chance of running the blockade. He was there waiting for his opportunity, when he was attacked with yellow fever and succumbed very quickly.

Much more could be said of this great and good man during his stay in Paris, but it would require some one abler than I am to do justice to such a subject. He was surely one of the most magnetic men I ever met, and he made such a deep impression on me by his genius, his energy, his courage, his goodness, his kindness, and his gentleness, that for many years of the early part of my life he was the model and the guiding-star I strove to follow.

